

STORIES FROM THE *ILIAD*

adapted from the retelling by Alfred J. Church

Prologue: The Long Siege

Across the sea came a host of Greeks, armed for war and bent upon the conquest of Troy. They came because one of the princes of Troy, Paris, had done a great wrong to Greece when he had carried away the beautiful Helen, wife of Menelaus of Sparta. Crying out for vengeance, they came in a thousand ships, with sails and oars, and landed on the beach at the foot of the plain. They challenged the warriors of Troy to come out on the plain and meet them in battle.

Thus the siege was begun. For more than nine years the city of Troy was surrounded by determined foes. But the walls were strong, and the men who defended them were brave. Many fierce battles were fought outside the gates. Sometimes the victory seemed to be with the Greeks, sometimes with the Trojans—but neither could gain any great advantage over the other. The Trojans could not drive the invaders from their shores; the Greeks could not force their way past the strong walls into the city.

One hero after another was slain, now on this side, now on that. Many were the losses on both sides, and great the suffering and grief. But still the struggle went on.

During the long siege, the Greeks sometimes took the battle beyond Troy to neighboring kingdoms friendly to the Trojans.

siege: the act of surrounding a city or fortress for a long time, cutting it off from supplies, to force it to surrender

host: a great many

bent: strongly determined

conquest: the act of conquering, or overcoming, by military force

vengeance: revenge; getting back at or getting even with someone

Leaving part of their army to watch Troy, the rest the Greeks went to plunder other cities, taking food, cattle, wine, and sometimes women, whom they forced to work as slaves. All of these spoils were divided among the Greek chieftains, with the first choice going to the leader of all the Greek army, Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus.

After one of these raids, Agamemnon took for himself as a prize of war a girl named Chryseis. She was the daughter of Chryses, a priest of Apollo, the god who was worshiped in the plundered city.

It is at this point in the course of events of the Trojan War that Homer begins the Iliad.

THE QUARREL

This is the story of the anger of Achilles, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans, from the day on which King Agamemnon and great Achilles first fell out with one another.

It happened that Chryses, priest of Apollo, came to Agamemnon and the other Greek chiefs. He had come to offer much gold to ransom his daughter, Chryseis. On his knees he begged them to take the gold and give him back the girl. "If you will do this," he said, "may the gods help you to take the city of Troy, and bring you back safe to your homes."

plunder: to use force to steal goods

spoils: stolen items; loot or goods taken from an enemy, particularly during war

chieftains: leaders of different groups

Achaeans: another name for the ancient Greeks

fell out with: quarreled; refused to have any dealings with

ransom: to pay to release a captured person

All the other chiefs were willing, but Agamemnon cried, "Away with you, old man. Do not linger here now and do not come again, or it will go hard on you, though you are a priest. As for your daughter, I will carry her back with me when I have taken Troy."

The old man left in great fear and sadness. He prayed to Apollo, and Apollo was angry that his priest should suffer such treatment. He came down from his palace atop Mount Olympus, shooting arrows among the Greeks, and each arrow carried deadly plague. For nine days the people died, and on the tenth day Achilles, the most valiant of the Greeks, called an assembly.

"Let us ask the soothsayers why Apollo is angry with us," said Achilles.

Then Calchas the soothsayer stood up. "You wish to know why Apollo is angry. I will tell you, but first you must promise to stand by me, for King Agamemnon will be angry when he hears what I have to say."

"Speak," said Achilles. "No man shall harm you while I live—nay, not Agamemnon himself."

Then Calchas said, "Apollo is angry because, when his priest came to ransom his daughter, Agamemnon refused him. Now, you must send back the girl, and take no money for her."

Then Agamemnon stood up and cried, "You are always the bearer of evil tidings! But so be it—I will give her up if I must, for I would not have the people die. But I will have some other share of the spoils. You must find me another prize instead, for I shall not be without one."

valiant: brave and noble

assembly: gathering; meeting

soothsayers: persons who, the ancient Greeks believed, could predict the future

tidings: news

And Achilles answered, "How shall we find you another prize? Those we took from the cities have been awarded; we cannot take back prizes that have already been given. Therefore, give back this girl, and if ever Zeus grants us to sack the city of Troy, we will make it up to you three and four times over."

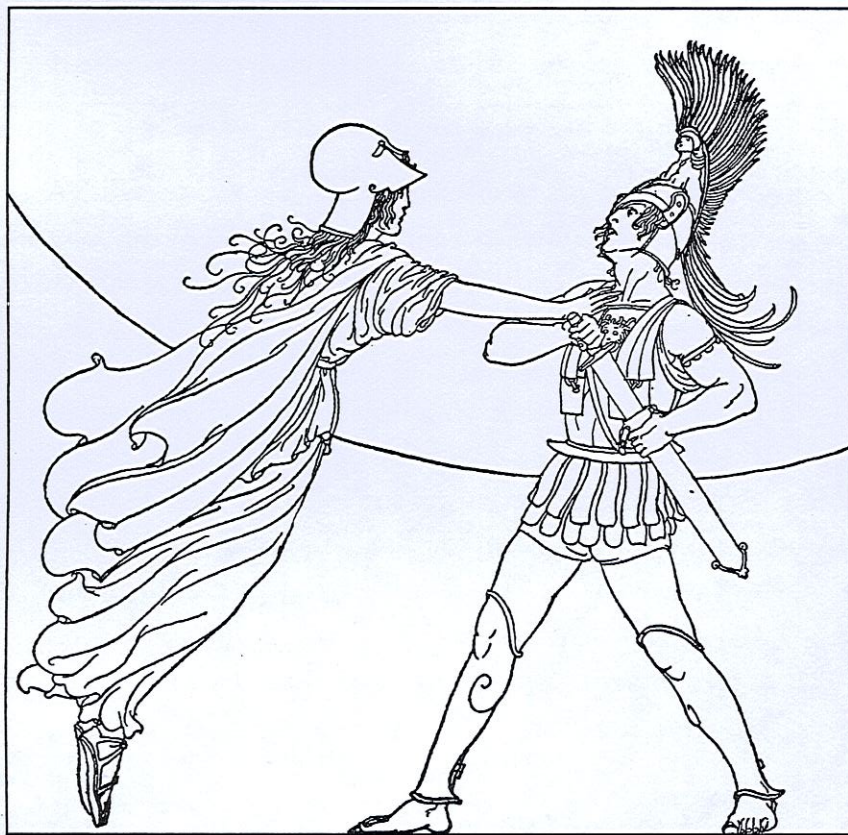
Then Agamemnon said, "Achilles, valiant though you be, you shall not thus outwit me. Are you to keep your own prize, while I sit tamely under my loss and give up the girl at your bidding? No—Achilles, I will come to your tent and take your own prize, the maiden Briseis."

The face of Achilles grew red with anger as he cried, "Never was there a king so shameless and greedy! I have no quarrel with the Trojans; I have been fighting in your cause and that of your brother, Menelaus. You leave me to fight while you sit in your tent at ease. But when the spoil is divided, you take the lion's share. And now you will take the little that was given to me. I will not stay here to be shamed and robbed. I will return home with my ships, for I will not stay here dishonored to gather gold and goods for you."

"Go," said Agamemnon, "and take your men with you. I have other chieftains as brave, who know that I am master here."

Then Achilles was mad with rage. He had half drawn his sword when the goddess Athena appeared beside him, though no one else in the assembly could see her. She caught Achilles by the hand and said, "I have come to stay your rage. Use bitter words if you will, but do not draw your sword."

sack: plunder; loot; in wartime, to take the valuables from a captured town
stay: to stop; to halt



"I have come to stay your rage."

Achilles answered, "No matter how angry a man may be, he must do as you command." Then he thrust the heavy sword back into the scabbard and turned to Agamemnon.

"Drunkard, with the eyes of a dog and the heart of a deer! Never fighting in the front of the battle! You would rather go round and rob the prizes from any man who stands up to you. I swear to you, that from this time forth, you may look for Achilles but you shall not find him. When your men fall dying by the murderous hand of Hector, you shall not know

scabbard: a sheath or cover for a sword

Hector: son of King Priam of Troy, and Troy's greatest warrior

how to help them, and you shall tear your heart with rage for the hour when you wronged the best of the Achaeans."

And Achilles went apart from his comrades and sat down upon the seashore, full of bitter anger.

Then Agamemnon went forth and took counsel with the chiefs, and soon the shrill-voiced heralds called the Greek host to battle. Many nations and many chiefs were there, but none that could compare with valiant Achilles—Achilles, whose very being ached for the clang of sword upon sword in battle, but who now sat apart and would not fight.

HECTOR AND ANDROMACHE

Now the sons of Troy and their allies came forth from the gates of the city and set themselves in battle array. The most famous of their chiefs were Hector, son of Priam, bravest and best of all, and Aeneas, son of the goddess Aphrodite.

Across the wide plain that separated the shore from the high walls of Troy, the Greeks went forward to the battle silently and in order after their chiefs. But from the Trojan army came loud shouts and cries. On both sides the gods urged them on.

With Ares, the god of war, at his side, Hector dealt death and destruction through the ranks of the Greeks. Hera and Athena saw this and were angered. They passed down to earth and urged on the Greeks. With renewed strength, the Greeks fought so fiercely that, even without Achilles, they forced the Trojans to flee behind the walls of the city for safety.

comrades: fellow soldiers; companions

heralds: messengers; announcers

array: arrangement; formation

Questions from the reading on Chryses and Apollo

1. Why does Chryses have to ask Apollo for a favor? Why does Chryses deserve a favor from Apollo, according to him?
2. What does this "exchange of favors" tell us about the relationship between gods and mortals in ancient Greek religion?
3. From your answer in #2, what sorts of problems could arise in Greek religion that has to do with this "exchange of favors"? How could you exploit the system?
4. If Achilles has no "quarrel" with the Trojans, then why does he fight against them? Who makes him fight?
5. How would being forced to fight against someone you don't have an issue with make you feel?
6. Would you have sat out the fight like Achilles did, or would you have kept fighting even after losing your prize? Why or why not?